BIOLOGY PERIOD 1
MS. WENDY WRITER (THIS STAYS, I SUPPOSE)

THE CERTIFIABLE LOONS

—

By Your Name

A shadow fell across the street. The Sun had been eclipsed and umpteen hundred faces looked up at the transient object that dared to defy the daystar. Staring back at them was a face as illuminating and pitiless as any sun, that of the grinning visage belonging to an enormous floating replica of a cartoon dog. Carried on by an errant gale of wind, here passed Wilkie Whelp; waggish ne'er-do-well, doomed poet, lover, reluctant hero, airhead flaneur of the idle rich, beleaguered scamp of the underworld. He took whichever role the story demanded. The balloon drifted over the scene, flanked by buildings at the side and gawked at below with an air of reverence. Some rushed underneath him to spend a moment in the shade. A wave of eschatological thinking swept through the crowd, when all of a sudden a gunshot split the air.

A patrolman with a badge that read *SGT. ENOCH* held the gun above his head to quell the panic, and a gaunt man rushed to meet him.

"What happened?" the gaunt man asked.

"Wilkie Whelp's on the lam," replied Enoch, "there's no telling how. Maybe the tethers snapped on their own, hot air twisted 'em, maybe, or maybe some anarchist with a chemical imbalance took it into his mind to give them a hand, or somethin'. I don't know."

"Wilkie Whelp?" cried the gaunt man, "my Wilkie Whelp? This is terrible. Another tragedy to add to the tapestry of life. Oppressive heat, indeed. I always tried to give him so much agency."

To his other side, Enoch was approached by a much stouter man, holding a cigar.

"You," he said to Enoch, "what's the prognosis? give me the lowdown, before I melt. Stat."

"Wilkie Whelp is at liberty," Enoch turned his head to the skies, "he drifted by a few minutes ago. He's up there somewhere."

The stout man ran his hand over his head.

"So then it's true. Do we know who did it?"

Enoch shook his head.

“My bet is we never will.”

The inquirer swerved around quickly to direct a pointed, accusatory finger at the gaunt man.

“This is all your fault, Biddlebaum. They sent me a capital R-romantic who wanted to play architect supremo when he was designing his balloons, and look what’s happened.”

Biddlebaum bounced back.

“Me? This parade was hatched up by you, Kilgore. You said you’re judge, jury, and executioner of everyone and everything on this parade block so long as you were manager. Where’s your excuse? Did double-checking Wilkie Whelp’s balloon suspension skip Your Highness’ mind?”

Kilgore blurted out to seemingly everybody at once and no one in particular.

“Put a bounty out on the head of that dog!”

Chiming in directly after was Biddlebaum.

“Better throw in a lottery ticket, or a streetcar transfer, or a coupon on parade goods and parade paraphernalia. That’ll get the lead out of the philistines.”

Elsewhere, further down the street, where Wilkie Whelp had yet to reach, a float decorated with streamers and buntings was plodding along slowly. At the lowest level stood three-time champion of the Miss Kudzu Vine title, who was waving genially to and fro. Adjacent to her on an elevated wooden platform stood a man wearing a regal sash, beckoning the audience to keep piling on the applause and the band to continue favoring the air. This man was Snodgrass, a major mayoral candidate. Prior to the parade, he recently booted from his ticket the champion of Miss Crude Petroleum on less-than-amicable terms following her instrumental role in an embezzlement plot. Miss Kudzu Vine took her place and accompanied the candidate in various stages of his campaign. The standing and waving portions of politicking she did not necessarily mind, but she was bored to the point of longing by the plethora of backroom deals and would often wile away the hours by doodling indifferently on unused reams of ballot sheets. Snodgrass was advised to make public appearances almost chiefly with Miss Kudzu Vine, and was hot off the heels after performing alongside her in a nickelodeon endorsement for Jenkins’ Talcum Powder for Infants & Invalids. Standing on a nearby sidewalk, rival candidate Thweebly burned with envy.

He craned his head lethargically as the float sputtered forward. Every now and then, he brushed fallen ticker tape off of his brow. Watching from directly behind Snodgrass was his mother, his most avid supporter.

"It's hopeless," he said as his head turned to follow the other candidate.

"Now, now, dear," said his mother with a hand on his shoulder, "don't get so worked up again. Remember what happened at your last campaign rally? One of the babies in a stroller made a noise that sounded like 'Snod-grass' instead of 'Thweebly' and you drove yourself into such a fit. Mother almost had to void your constituency."

"Don't remind me, Mother," replied Thweebly with a low-hanging head, "it's just not fair. Listen to these rubes. They don't know who they're cheering for. And that band has played the same song three times now. Even the Sun is against me."

"Now, now, dear. This weather gets to people. It's like being on a tropical vacation all the time. Perhaps we'd better take our leave and get on the road for your next whistle stop."

"I suppose," said a despondent Thweebly, "it'd be a good idea to take our leave and get on the road for my next whistle stop."

"Perhaps we'd better move quickly," urged his mother, "I do believe I've just heard a gunshot somewhere. There might be an assassin lurking nearby."

Thweebly scoffed.

"Not with my luck."

His mother took him by the arm and began guiding him through the turbulent sea of voters.

"There, there, dear. I know what will cheer you up. Let Mother read your campaign grosses."

The gunshot echoed far and wide. Even a bespectacled man wasting away on the outskirts of town could make it out. The violent boom, however, did not do much to alter his mood. Behind the iron bars, he stood, with his face locked in a grim countenance. Nearby, a man was slackening a rope, readying it for immediate use. The sky grew greyer overhead. A wind blew cold and chilled.

"Will you be staying or going?" asked the ticket clerk, fanning himself with one.

Mister Chatterbox slowly backed away as he thought on it. The clerk watched him pass by the bars in front of the booth around a dozen times, before leaving his post to go help tighten the rope on the mail hook.

Sitting nervously, with his eyes on the train station clock, Mister Chatterbox continued to think. He spent most of his time doing this, in addition to writing columns and taking photographs of whatever interested him, and which he could not always be sure were of any interest to many others. He carried on him a camera and a notepad. His scrutinies had lead him to a source which insisted that every forty seconds or so, some wayward creature tucked themselves into a dirt nap. Mister Chatterbox kept count with the ticking of the clock. He had sent in select pieces of his work to several newspapers, magazines, literary supplements, and the Happy Sappy Telegram & Greeting Card Company — none of which had issued any response, including the latter, whose stationery was embroidered with various kinds of huggable flora and smiling fauna. Meanwhile, a forlorn chairman could be gumming up the sidewalks that minute.

Mister Chatterbox had been at the train station for a consider amount of time and had not yet decided, as the ticket clerk put it, whether he was staying or going. In his hands with a dollar bill that he was shimmying dejectedly. His mind filtered through the prospective somewhere's a train might lead to, but even with a list of locations directly in front of him, he could not make up his mind exactly *where* that somewhere may be. This extended to other areas of his life, where he often struggled to decide which passages to keep and which to toss, which pictures to jump at the opportunity of using and which to hang up for a later date. Right about then, some poor schmuck was arranging for a permanent necktie.

The gunshot had startled him, but was not particularly incongruous to his usual state of mind. What did jolt him awake was the sight of a gargantuan balloon dog floating over the town and towards the wilds beyond. He had to bend himself in a corkscrew position in the station seat to get a proper look at Wilkie Whelp, who was drifting through the air with no apparent set destination. Eventually, the giant dog passed the vanishing point, leaving Mister Chatterbox in an especially introspective position. He looked back at the clock. Hemlock would be the last flower some destitute character picked, stopping to smell the roses, then stopping altogether. It was difficult to clear his mind and focus on the question of the train with what he had just seen. Pacing up to the front of the station, he overheard a group of philosophers all clad in black donating their views.

“It’s quite simple, really,” said one of them, “Wilkie Whelp will continue to drift and probably wind up a watery grave, the pitiful thing. They can offer all the pretty pennies they want.”

Another interjected. “No, no, you’re way, way off. Coupon or no coupon, they’ll get him back down somehow. My bet is we haven’t seen the last of that dog.”

“Interesting points,” said the third. “I’ll concede to that, interesting points. It takes all kinds to make up this vale of tears, of course. But I’ve heard tell of balloons that snag telephone poles and burst into flames. Sometimes they even take down a plane or two, if they’re big enough. Souvenir hunters circle into the fiery wreckage like buzzards to pick up the scraps. They’re lucky to come away with just one arm and a leg. The way I see it, the gunshot and the dog in the sky are just a black omen, gentlemen. Dark tides ahead. Dark tides indeed.”

The fourth man let out a wistful sigh. “Me, I just hope whatever happens is in Wilkie Whelp’s best interest. I feel like I’m boiling out here.”

They all concurred and continued to watch the sky. Mister Chatterbox stood nearby on the station steps. Crashing a plane into a burning balloon, that was one he hadn’t thought of yet. The thought of what to do and what not to do and what could not be undone once he did do it raced through his mind. He looked back at where he had been sitting, looked ahead at nothing in particular, and decided boldly to walk in the vague, general direction Wilkie Whelp had last been seen. Someone someplace was having their last iceberg salad.

Walking down the road, Mister Chatterbox passed several uneventful moments, at one point concerned with whether he had gone by the same dead tree and dried-up patch of grass twice. Then he stumbled upon a somewhat dilapidated looking hovel that was overgrown with moss, along with faded, colorful swatches that were scattered about the entrance. Mister Chatterbox stopped to take a photograph. A dozen withered trees dotted around the building that looked as though they might collapse onto the roof any minute. No one may have been around to hear it, were it not for the grizzled figure that sat rocking on the sagging wood of the porch. The torn jacket and the ten-gallon hat the man wore were so similar to the decaying house that Mister Chatterbox had not initially noticed him. The man, who sat with a repeater by his side, soon spoke up.

“Stop right there,” he said gruffly, “just plant yourself right where you stand. I know what you’re about to say. You’re about to ask me if I can track down for you that there balloon that just went by. You’re thinking, ‘when is he going to run out of that chair with his gun and go charging after that balloon?’ I’ll bet you think the balloon itself went by just for you to come

and get me, right? Forget it, buster. You've got another thing comin'. I'm not lifting a finger in this scorcher."

Mister Chatterbox had indeed stopped, and was standing as petrified as the trees as he listens to the armed man's protests.

"And it doesn't matter," the man continued, without lifting himself from his chair, eyeing the dollar bill still in Mister Chatterbox's hand, "really, it doesn't, whether or not you reach into your ol' hidden moneybag and hand over every doubloon you've got. Colonel Lew," the man threw his thumb backwards, indicating himself, "cannot be bought and sold like a box of dry goods. Even the — the waddyacallit — the insinuation is hurtful. And standing there taking pictures. What are you, some kind of mudslinger or something? I've got a reputation to uphold. You've got to wake up earlier than that if you want a scoop on Colonel Lew. So make like your little balloon, buster. Take off. If I catch you soliciting on this property again, I'll have no choice but to open fire. "

The man — Colonel Lew, as it were — took his gun and went inside. The shoddy door buckled loudly as it hit the frame. The noise was enough to snap Mister Chatterbox out of his inertia. He took a last look at the house, before stepping forward down the road.

Inside the house, Colonel Lew staggered against the wall as his gun held him steady. Patches cut from various balloons adorned the walls of his house and the porch. Surrounded by these memento mori's, he thought back bitterly to his previous job. The balloon he had been chasing was thrown wildly of course by a gust of wind, making its way into a municipal area before clipping the left ear of the dog mascot situated on the marquee of Franklin's Mutt Feed Emporium, robbing him of his bounty. Colonel Lew, naturally, considered himself one of life's tragical creatures; a vaunted gargoyle who had fallen from his perch and left to grumble his way through the muck. He remembered the incident in his mind, over and over again, before he threw open the clanging door and went charging down the road to greet Mister Chatterbox.

"All right," said Colonel Lew, "you talked me into it."

The two of them continued onwards for an indiscernible period of time, with Mister Chatterbox carrying a camera and a notepad, and Colonel Lew lugging around the gun. They arrived eventually at a fork in the road. Spanning between the different paths was a gloomy field with what looked like some sort of thin, sparse shrub standing alone near the middle of it. A slight branch stuck out on either side. Mister Chatterbox was wracking his mind for the path to choose, while Colonel Lew searched his pockets for a rusted coin he had to make the choice for them.

“Tell you what,” he said his search proved unsuccessful, “I’ll shoot at that dead shrub out there. The way it falls is the way we go.”

He was about to lower his gun before the both of them noticed the branches had moved. The two of them began to cautiously make their approach through the field. The closer they drew, the more it became apparent that it was not, in fact, a dead shrub, but instead a child looking up with cupped hands at the sky. Colonel Lew, believing he recognized a fellow balloon enthusiast, made his presence known.

“You’re too late, sport. The balloon’s already passed. Just a little too late, of all the rotten luck. That dog’s in some other part of the sky by now. When we catch him, I might bring back and show you a piece from his tail or something. Notice I say ‘might.’ No promises. Like I told buster here, though, I don’t do pictures. Just thought we should establish that ground rule before you show up with a camera, all smilin’ and junk, and I have to go and break your heart or something. Or maybe you can read about it in the papers. Has your mother taught you about — waddyacallit — preterits and things like that yet?”

The cupped hands did not fall from their place even as a voice replied.

“I’m not looking for any balloon, I’m looking for planes.”

It was evident now that the outfit she had on was in the style of an aviator, with a leather jacket and a pair of goggles pushed up to a bomber hat.

Colonel Lew spoke with a wounded, defensive tone.

“Looking for aeroplanes out here in some field? You’re going to get yourself shot or blown up or something. A lot of planes carry bombs.”

Finally, she turned away from the sky and looked up at the two imposers.

“I had to get away from the pests,” she said, “all crowded together like that, I felt like an egg on the sidewalk. Can’t focus on anything with that parade going on. Too much action. I had to get away from all the confetti and the balloons and the pests. Besides, I’ve already drawn up my will in case any aviation accident should occur. There’s a model biplane and an old parachute in my estate that some shifty lice would kill to get their hands on.”

“Parade?” said Colonel Lew, raising his voice, “I didn’t know about any parade. Nobody told me anything about it. What are they having that for? Did I miss something? Did our boys win a war?”

“I don’t know *why* they’re having it,” said the girl, turning her head back up toward the sky, “they’re just having it.”

Colonel Lew shook his head dolefully.

“They fly balloons just anywhere now, do they? Are we plundering and pillaging each other, too? Breaking babies on wheels? I tell ya, there’s nowhere left for sense in this place anymore. I may just be the last sane one left.”

“You say you’re after a balloon,” the girl added, “who, exactly?”

“Looked like a dog,” said Colonel Lew, “from where I was sitting.”

“I think I saw that one. Yeah, I did. Wilkie Whelp. I figure I’ll go with you.”

“Oh,” said Colonel Lew haughtily, “what happened to aeroplanes and ‘too many pests?’”

“I’ve been standing out here all day, and I haven’t seen a single a bird — that’s a plane, for your information — go by. I figure a balloon will make as good a study in aviation as the next thing. I might be able to put that reward money to good use. At least, before I can see a real bird. A plane, that is.”

“What’d you need the money for? Buy yourself a gum ball?”

“Because,” answered Twig, undeterred, “planes don’t come cheap.”

“Ha,” chortled Colonel Lew, “we’re not going to let the mission be compromised by some kid who’s got her mind on pie-in-the-sky flying machines instead of the task at hand. C’mon, buster. Let’s hit the road.”

“Things’ll be Jake between us,” said the girl, standing with her face to both of them now, “so long as you don’t louse anything up.”

“Not likely,” replied Colonel Lew, “let’s keep going, buster.”

He began walking away, with Mister Chatterbox supposing that he may as well follow.

The girl ran up to them again and demanded an explanation.

“What’s it you, anyhow?” she asked.

Colonel Lew turned back with a scoff.

“Like I said, sport. I’m tracking down that one that’s run off now. You stick with your aeroplanes, all fine and peachy-keen-like, and the grownups will get down to the nitty-gritty now.”

Whether by choice or circumstance, the two ended up walking on the path nearest them.

Mister Chatterbox looked back to contemplate all that they were leaving behind when he noticed that the girl was no longer in the field. He scanned several directions before he found her walking just slightly behind Colonel Lew. It didn’t take long for the grizzled man to notice, at which point he suggested Mister Chatterbox pay her off with dollar bill, claiming that she could buy a stack of aeroplanes, but to no avail. Then he attempted to push her back with the stock of his gun, before eventually surrendering to the path of least resistance.

The trio walked along the narrow road until it came to a stop, whereupon they crossed through another field. Colonel Lew made bizarre zigzagging maneuvers past the butchels of briar in some vain attempt to lose the girl, but invariably Mister Chatterbox would get turned around as well, and, at any rate, she never remained lost for long. Suddenly, hovering at a distance, they spotted Wilkie Whelp. Colonel Lew readied his gun and fired a shot. The balloon seemed unaffected. He fired again, and the dog continued to drift off. He squinted hard this time, gritting his teeth, and shot a round that disappeared over the trees. Wilkie Whelp faded from the horizon.

“I missed,” grumbled Colonel Lew.

Crossing through a thicket of trees, the group carried on across fallen limbs. Colonel Lew attempted a few times to convince the girl that something with wings had flown passed them, in varying directions of the sky, but she didn’t fall for it after the first instance. He stopped inventing planes in the air after it became clear it was unlikely to accomplish anything. They continued through their trail until they reached a clearing, where they saw a road lined with telephone poles, save for one that had been charred black. On the dreary, desolate road walked a former sign twirler, wearing his lowered head and a sandwich board which advertised the parade, as he dragged the cardboard arrow through the dust.

“What happened here?” asked Colonel Lew.

“You should’ve been there,” said the sign twirler, “first, I’m twirling this sign, trying to, anyway, directing any stragglers who might wander by into town and getting them to read my sandwich board. The world made sense. Only, there were no stragglers. So things get a little dull and then I notice everything is turning darker. So, I say, ‘wait a minute, Ernie, that’s not just the

blue devils your mother warned you about. This is the real McCoy. Things are literally turning darker.' So I look up, and there I see it," here, Ernie gestures with a widening of his arms above him, "a giant dog is floating directly above my head, and I'm staring at him, and he's staring at right back at me. And I think, in that moment, we knew each on some level. Primordially, I mean.

"So, by now, I say 'where I am? Mars?' Then, I hear something fly by my ear, like tiny screaming. I stick a finger in there, and then something whizzes by my other ear, like one of those little fairies crying out for help or something. The kind a kid might tell you is behind some bushes just to get a rise out of you. Always a crock of bull. So, I say, 'Ernie, you're a rational man, there's a perfectly sound explanation for all of this, maybe you've caught fever, must be those balmy winds or something.' Then, I hear a loud popping noise above my head and notice the box doohickey on that telephone pole has burst right into flames. I watched it burn."

All four stood there and it was a few moments before anybody said anything. Then, Colonel Lew took up the lead.

"Good God, man. Where did you say that balloon went?"

Ernie let out a despairing sort of laugh and staked his sign into the soot-covered ground, before pulling out a handkerchief to wipe a tear that was rolling down his cheek.

"There is no God," he said, and shuffled away with the sandwich board rattling against him.

If Wilkie Whelp had been above, he would've seen three lonesome dots working their way over a tract of barren grassland, pausing every now and then to observe the sky in each direction. During one of these stops, Colonel Lew asked the girl if she had sight of any balloon activity in her field of vision.

"Did you check your designated sky position, sport?"

"Yes, twice."

"Better check it thrice, sport. The eyes have been known to play tricks out here in no man's land."

The sport in question responded with indignation.

"I have a name, and you'd better get used to it. Because pretty soon, you won't be able to forget it. It'll be flying overhead everywhere you look. Everything'll be coming up Twig."

“Twig?” queried Colonel Lew.

“Pretty lousy name, don’t’cha think?”

“I’m too old for a name to scare me.”

Twig demurred slightly.

“I personally think it’s a really loused-up thing. I don’t know why I got stuck with it, just that I got stuck with it. Some pest’s sick idea of a joke.”

“At least I know what to yell out now.”

“If it had my way, I’d’ve picked the name ‘Birdie,’ like the plane, y’know? Up there with the barnstormers, practicing my aileron rolls, dogfighting, that’s where I belong. I think that suits me better than a lousy title like ‘Twig.’”

“Well,” said Colonel Lew, “it’s no fairy tale world.”

They continued crossing through the field and stopped once again after a while to check the skies, when Colonel Lew let out a bellow as he pointed to a black dot above the ground in the distance. He aimed the gun steadily, and, with noticeably constrained breathing, pulled the trigger. A bullet flew out and the dot hovering in the sky was soon a dot falling to the ground. Colonel Lew let out a small declaration of triumph.

“Moth,” he said, “meet flame.”

The three made their way to the point where the balloon had descended, and almost worried they had been beaten to it by scavengers when they saw two strangers astride it, one standing and the other crouching.

Running to meet them, Colonel Lew shouted, “Gangway! Hold it, just stop right there, plant yourselves and don’t move an inch.”

Both remained where he had found them.

“All right, what’s the big idea, busters?”

The crouching one spoke first.

“Merely examining the remains of Cassandra,”

Colonel Lew turned white as a ghost.

“How’s that now?” he asked.

“Who’s the Jane?” inquired Twig.

The other, who was standing with a corncob pipe in his hand, elaborated.

“Someone shot down one of our weather balloons,” he said with a glance at the newcomers, in contrast to the crouching one, whose eyes remained glued to the device. “Probe No. 2B, to be more precise, although my colleague added some scholarly color to the name.”

“What’ll they think up next? Are there “hold this balloon and you’ll get a dozen free wishes” balloons, too?” asked Colonel Lew, “They’re finding out the weather with balloons now?”

“No, old boy, we do not “find out” the weather with our balloons. We merely detect the rumors that may be brewing in the atmosphere above, and see where the die lands.”

“Murder,” said the crouching one.

“Calm yourself, Hither. There’s no need for dramatics. I’m sure it was a perfect accident. No malicious intent behind the thing.”

“That’s right,” Colonel Lew chimed in, “I’m sure whoever did it didn’t mean to do it. That is, they didn’t know they were shooting down one of your weather balloons. Maybe they did it with reasonable justification and — waddyacallit — unprejudiced mind.. It could’ve been anyone. Maybe they thought it was a giant balloon in the shape of a dog. These things happen.”

The standing one who had placated his crouching colleague concurred.

“Yes,” he added with a guffaw, “they certainly do, especially knowing these harebrained gunslinger types. You know the ones I refer to. The kind who go around with an itchy-trigger finger, prepared to massacre anything that moves, blasting their fellow man to smithereens here, there, wherever he’s unlucky enough to show his mug. As wanton as if they were picking off dandelion seeds.”

Colonel Lew’s pallor morphed into a slight maroon.

“Slain,” said the one called Hither, stressing each syllable.

“No need to worry, old boy,” said the standing man, “things have a way of cycling around. You know it, I know it. It’s in the very water we drink.”

“Don’t patronize me, Yon,” said Hither, “I’m not like one of your water wheels where you only have to say the word and I’m spinning happy as can be again. I’m a human being, who’s lost a balloon.”

“Go into town,” said Colonel Lew, “they’re giving them away.”

Twig stepped forward to eye the downed equipment.

“Have either of you seen,” she said, now raising her head to the sky, “any planes today?”

Yon replied with a note of contempt.

“I should say not.”

Hither exhaled derisively.

“Hah, planes.”

Twig took another step forward, but Colonel Lew barred from advancing any further with the end of his gun.

“Then,” she asked, somewhat disillusioned, “have you seen the balloon in question? One Wilkie Whelp, per chance?”

Yon thought on this for a moment.

“I knew a fellow in the geological department named Wilkie Wecht. Doctor Wecht, if you’re feeling generous. Don’t suppose it could be the same fellow, could it? He wasn’t a dog. At least, not in the sense you’re looking for. Hah-hah.”

Yon looked to Hither expectantly, but got no reaction from the ever-crouching meteorologist.

“On second thought,” began Yon again, “I do believe I saw the canine in question. Yes, I recall it vividly now. A grey sky, just like the one over us now. He slipped over us when I wasn’t looking, and Hither grabbed me by the shoulders and hoisted me forward to look at the spectacle above. He lingered for a while, Hither worried about the weather balloons, and then, like a whispered secret in the breeze, he was gone.”

“In which direction did he go?” asked Twig, apparently having overcome the amnesty she had originally harbored towards the duo’s anti-aeroplane bent.

Yon rotated his arm and pointed off to the side rigidly, like a scarecrow in white.

“That-a-way,” he said.

“Hot out, isn’t it?” asked Colonel Lew.

“Sweltering,” answered Yon.

“Brutal,” said the despairing Hither.

“Did you at least find out the weather?” asked Colonel Lew.

“Rain,” said Hither without looking up from the ground, “rain, forever.”

“Well,” Yon followed, “we do not pretend to be prophets. I don’t know if I can concur with my colleague here on the ‘forever’ addendum, but Probe No. 2B is leaning towards downpour. Was, I mean.”

“It looks pretty loused up. Can it be salvaged?” asked Twig.

“I should think so, most of the major scientific bits seem to be in fine shape despite the fall.”

“Well,” Colonel Lew drew closer, “so long as this here balloon part is of no interest to you, may I have some of it?”

“Knock yourself out,” said Yon with a shrug.

Colonel Lew, Twig, and Mister Chatterbox all looked to Hither for approval.

“There never lived a mourner,” said the dour crouching man, “who wept for the departed’s get-up.”

With a tattered piece of balloon tucked away in his pocket, Colonel Lew led the charge towards Wilkie Whelp. Twig was eyeing the skies for anything that flew, and Mister Chatterbox took a picture of almost everything that remotely interested him, every few hundred steps or so. As the convoy marched forward, Colonel Lew made his feelings known.

“I’m a man of science myself, you know.”

Twig expressed skepticism.

“How do you figure that?”

“Because I was there, at all those expositions, right next to the paleontologists and the astronomers and the — the waddyacallit — gizmo inventors. That whole gang. The balloon

crowd has endured as many naysayers as any other burgeoning field of its day did. We were all in the same boat. Balloon, rather."

"So who rocked the balloon?" asked Twig.

"All I'll say is," returned Colonel Lew, "I don't think there's been a field with as much heartache as the ballooning arts. Oh, yes, it's an art, too. It's had its dark days and its heartbreaks. You young aeroplanes types don't know the meaning of the words. Why, there's nary a practitioner I know in the whole field who hasn't at one time or another considered riding that balloon all the way up and taking the long plunge down."

Mister Chatterbox added another to his list to keep track of.

When they had gone further, an object could be seen climbing the sky with a shaky rhythm. Another balloon.

Colonel Lew reflexively raised his gun up again, but Mister Chatterbox and Twig both sprang forward to lower it, before its wielder came to his senses on his own.

"That's no dog," he observed.

It was true. The balloon was not shaped like a dog, nor in fact any earthly animal. Not even a plant could be assigned to it. It was in a bizarre square shape, with ends that tapered off at two sides. With curiosity, they trekked toward its source.

After brushing aside shrubs and a few bare branches, the group found themselves standing before a wooden booth painted white with polka dots and with dark curtains drawn aside at the window. Behind the booth, through the window, a man was turned the other way with the squelching noises of rubber emanating from therein. Adjacent to him and his booth was a rapt crowd of children and a dead tree. The trio walked slowly up to the display. Many of the children held balloons of their own, with shapes as warped and strange as the one that had apparently appeared from the same place. The man performed a quick turn around to face the audience, both its original members and the latest additions. He was clad in white face paint, with a variety of shapes and symbols littering the areas around the eyes. He wore a bowler hat that was about ten tuxes too small for his head, and the rest of his outfit followed the clown getup. In both hands, he unveiled his latest creation.

"This," he said with a regal air, "is Loathing."

It was yet another oddly-styled balloon, twisted to resemble perhaps a burning plane, something extracted in an operating theatre, or simply a mangled balloon. An empty-handed child got up from the truncated log he sat upon and ran to the booth.

"Can I have it, Mister So-So? Please? Pleeeeease?"

"Hmm, I don't know, Skippy," Mister So-So apparently delineated on Skippy's request for a while, "After all, you did let go of Malcontentment just a few moments ago."

A look of shame washed over Skippy's face.

"Very well," So-So capitulated, "let my mercy outweigh my wrath. Just try to hold on this time."

As he handed over the balloon, So-So finally acknowledge the older guests in attendance.

"Ah! I see we have, perhaps, some new regulars?"

Colonel Lew cleared his throat and spoke rapidly.

"We were just passing through. We've seen it. We'll go now."

Mister So-So registered disappointment.

"That's too bad, pilgrims. Stay awhile, stay awhile. Restore your weary selves upon the stumps. You may laugh one minute, you may cry the next. You may want to break out in rapturous applause and dance the tarantella as a cure for madness like in days of yore. Perhaps you will do all at the same time. So-So the Great would like to see someone manage to do it at least once. Who knows, you may even learn a thing or two. Why, hello, little girl," he said, addressing Twig, "if there were a balloon named after you, what might it be called?"

"Twig," said Twig.

"Twig!" repeated So-So, "how unusual! Tell me, if someone wants to get something, a chair, for instance, do they say, 'Go get that chair, Twig?' That's odd. Not that we're strangers to that around here. That one there is called Skippy. I say, these muggy temperatures just drive me up the walls. Twig, did you notice the other children? Did you notice the balloons?"

"As a matter of fact," answered Colonel Lew for her, "we did."

"Yes," Twig continued, with a hint of annoyance, "it's why we went over here. See, some pest loused up a parade and we're trying to find the balloon that got away in all the excitement."

“Ah! A most uncertain quest! I have just the accompaniment for it.”

So-So reached back into his booth and soon returned with another contorted balloon.

“This,” said So-So, “is Disquietude.”

The audience let out a succession of “oooh’s” and “aaah’s.” He reached over the counter and tied the string of the balloon to the wrist of a trifle apprehensive Twig.

“Apprehension,” said So-So, “that’s another good one!”

“I appreciate the gesture,” said Twig, “but we’re trying to find a specific balloon. Wilkie Whelp. A giant dog.”

Mister Chatterbox had become the subject of interest for several children because of his camera. Likewise, Colonel Lew had to fend off the incursions of a cluster who were trying to nab his gun.

“I’m afraid the only balloons I pay close attention to are the ones you have found right before your eyes,” said So-So ins rueful tone, “Each balloon has a sentiment I’ve worked in there somehow, and there are many balloons. So-So the Great is a master of his craft.”

“I don’t suppose ‘Modesty’ is one of them,” said Colonel Lew, holding his gun over his head, away from the grasping arms below.

Another child ran up to the booth astride Twig.

“Mister So-So, Suzy took Despair right out of my hands even though it was my turn to have it.”

“Suzy, you already have Forlorn Indecision. Let Jimmy have Despair.”

The child rushed back now that justice was ordained.

Twig remained where she stood. “Is there a balloon called Happiness? Joy?”

“No, no,” said So-So, “So-So the Great does not work with those sorts of balloons.”

The trio turned to walk away, and passed through a small throng of children.

“Now,” So-So’s voice trailed off as he ducked within the booth to reveal another one of his balloons, “who wants Unfathomable Ennui, and who wants Bottomless Dread?”

A cry went up from the audience. “I do! I do!”

“Mister So-So,” said a child, “I popped Weltschmerz.”

“Tsk, tsk,” was So-So’s response.

Mister Chatterbox, Colonel Lew, and Twig, with Disquietude still tied to her wrist, were continuing down the road when a child stood up from one of the seats and tugged on Colonel Lew’s jacket.

“Hey, mister.”

Colonel Lew looked down to face the boy.

“Yes, son?”

“Are you *really* after Wilkie Whelp?”

“If that’s his name, then indeed, we are.”

“He went this way, mister,” pointed the child.

“I tip my hat to you, son,” said Colonel Lew, and made good on what he said.

The child looked at the gun he carried.

“Hey, mister, what did Wilkie Whelp do?”

“Well, it’s like the girl said. Some gadfly fouled things up and this dog saw his opportunity and took it. He just ran amok like that.”

“Why?” asked the boy.

No one in the group knew how to answer that, so they kept walking.

The sky was getting darker as they headed into the forest. Noises surrounded them, seemed to erupt from every tree, every blade of grass.

“How many balloons have you shot down?” Twig asked.

“Countless.”

“As in, you can’t remember?”

“As in, there are too many to count. I used to notch every one ‘em down, but after a while, it just proved to be to much.”

"Did you catch the last one?"

Colonel Lew's voice grew quieter.

"What?"

"The Flying Butcher remembers how many he's shot down in his plane. I hear he's shot down a hundred barrage balloons."

Colonel Lew returned to his usual laugh with a scoff.

"He hasn't shot down that many."

"Has to. The man on the newsreel said so."

"He's lying through his teeth. They just put him on there to fill the time before they cut to the Jenkins' Talcum Powder for Infants & Invalids. The man on the newsreel doesn't know any more about balloons than, well, than you do."

"What don't I know?" challenged Twig.

"That you don't shoot down that many balloons without it catching up to you. I heard of a man once. Worked for the circus as a knife-thrower. Had this cute little act where he'd balance himself upside-down and throw them at floating targets shaped like ducks or loons or something. With the beaks and everything. And sure enough, a day like usual, he hit 'em all, one after the other. The crowd is loving it, eating it up, all of a sudden — although, really, he should've seen it coming — he goes to stand upright and sees all the ducks or loons or whatever about to crash down on top of him.

"Then, they do. They had the — the waddyacallit - the funeral procession a few days later. Might be a little over your head, sport. There's a parade worth having. Say he looked just like a deflated balloon. Seems to change every time I hear it, but I say there's some truth in it. Personally, I can't imagine the man would've preferred another way. Balloons brought me into this world, I figure they're going to be the ones to take me out."

"I know what a funeral procession is," said Twig, "they talked about it on the newsreel, when these doughboys shot this spy pest and had to bury him in a crater *then* had to do it over again because they loused it up the first time."

Mister Chatterbox wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead as he walked.

After some time of combing through the branches jutting out from the undomesticated wilderness lining each side of the bath, they all three could see from the light at the end of the woods that it opened onto a river bank and, then, a field. Connecting the two was a cobblestone bridge, which the trio would've walked across unimpeded across were they not impeded. Bisecting the bridge was a kiosk and a barrier attached to it.

"All right," said Colonel Lew, examining the predicament, "never seen this particular model, but I've encountered some like this before. If we crawl over or under quickly, we can get by without much of a fuss. Sport, I guess you'll go under. That leaves buster and I to—

"Woah, woah, woah," crooned a voice, and a man traipsed out of the kiosk with a smile and mustache upon his face.

"How's the rain on the rhubarb, folks?" He said, proving with authority that the voice belonged to him.

"We'd like to pass," said Twig.

The plump, mustached man turned toward the older, taller adventurers.

"Letting the tyke get some fresh air with her balloon before bedtime, huh? That's cute. That's real cute. What's this one supposed to be? Some kind of eel or something? Unfortunately for you folks, that's about as much fresh air as I can allow you to get. 'Cause I'm the Bridge Master 'round these parts, and you folks aren't goin' anywhere unless that anywhere is behind you."

"We've done nothing wrong, hoss," said Colonel Lew, "nothing unpardonable," he amended, before continuing, "We're perfectly fit to cross."

"You're looking mighty worn-out for regular taxpayers. Been booking it across a field or two? Ducking Johnny Law in a hollow tree? C'mon, folks. This isn't the season for this. Feel that heat? That's not the Sun. I do believe your pants are fit to combust. Yessiree, I'd say I've got as good a reason as any not to let you muddy up my bridge."

"Who said anything about paying taxes?" asked Colonel Lew.

"Look," insisted Twig, "we're trying to find a balloon—"

The Bridge Master thumbed at Disquietude.

"Found it," he said.

“No, no, no,” protested Twig, “a certain balloon. We’ve been tracking him all day—“

“Oh, it’s the perfect cover. How do I know that’s not one of your lines you feed to unsuspecting bridge masters before you start ransacking town on the other side? Not on my bridge, you don’t.”

Mister Chatterbox pulled out the dollar bill, and gestured it vaguely toward the Bridge Master.

“Attempted bribery,” said he, “I’ll have to add that to your record.

“Surely,” said Twig, grabbing onto Colonel Lew’s shirt sleeve, “you wouldn’t mind letting a doting old man across, would you, Mister Bridge Master, sir?”

“Long life, Pops. Lot of time to make enemies.”

“Surely,” said Colonel Lew, nudging Twig forward, “you wouldn’t mind letting a poor starving waif pass by? Heaven knows I haven’t given her much on this side, with her brother sick in the pesthouse and her mother, may she rest easy. But if this little girl gets through, maybe, just maybe, she’ll get the lick at life I know she deserves.”

“Cute,” were the words of the smiling but unamused Bridge Master, “real cute. But you can lay off the bleeding heart stuff with me.”

“Surely,” said the both of them, as they have Mister Chatterbox a push toward the Bridge Master, “you wouldn’t mind letting a man with glasses cross?”

“Listen,” said the Bridge Master with a couple of fingers pinching his forehead, “maybe this balloon is real, maybe it isn’t. But all I can say is, you folks aren’t getting through. So either you turn the Grand Tour around, or you spend all night in G-A-O-L or J-A-I-L, depending on the region from whence you hail. Seems like a pretty clear choice to me. But what do I know? I’m just the Bridge Master.”

Twig drooped over in defeat.

“So that’s it. The whole is over, just like that. How ducky. This close to Wilkie Whelp and it’s all loused up by some pest on a bridge—“

“Wait, wait, wait,” said the Bridge Master, “did you say Wilkie Whelp? Wilkie Whelp of *The Whole Canine Yards*? Wilkie Whelp of *Curs N’ Spurs*? That Wilkie Whelp?”

“I believe so, yes,” Twig raised herself up again, “The very same.”

“Well,” beamed the Bridge Master, “why didn’t you say so? Many a-lonely might I’ve spent reading about that scamp in the funny pages, replaying his pictures in my head. Sometimes, it’s the only thing keeping me from jumping right in that stream down there. But what’s this about trying to locate him? How?”

“He broke free from a parade today,” said Twig, “we have reason to believe he’s floated over this way.”

“No wonder,” mused the Bridge Master, “I can’t see a thing from out here. Nothing going, most of the time. Maybe that’s why I’ve taken to Wilkie Whelp so much. I always wondered if that old dog was looking down on me somewhere. Wouldn’t guessed it’d be true. I never cared for the intermediate serials. Wilkie Whelp works alone. He doesn’t need a vamp. I guess that’s the kind of drivel the groundlings will eat up with a spoon, though.”

“So,” said Colonel Lew tentatively, as though he were defusing a bomb, “you’ll — waddyacallit — let us pass over your bridge?”

The Bridge Master walked back into his kiosk, and the three stood in front of the barrier with trepidation. A few moments later, it began to lift. Once it was vertical, a mustached head poked out of the kiosk.

“Bring him home,” said the Bridge Master.

Mister Chatterbox, Colonel Lew, and Twig booked it over the bridge and across the field as though they were the ones being chased. The flatness terminated in a hill, which they climbed breathlessly. From the vantage point of the top, they saw him. Strikingly visible in the darkening sky was Wilkie Whelp. He was around a minute’s run away. Mister Chatterbox took a photo, and they were off. Down the hill they went, following their course through the final stretch of where they stood. Just a few steps more would’ve put them directly below the balloon.

Colonel Lew turned to Twig.

“Sport, I’m trusting you with something. If anything should happen, if, forbade it all, I should be — waddyacallit — horribly incapacitated, I want you to finish the job,” with this he removed a knife from his boot and handed it to her, “although, try to make it look like the balloon did it, if you can. For posterity and all. You’ve got the gumption, sport. I trust you won’t louse it up.”

Twig did not seem share in his assessment of her mercy-killing prowess.

Colonel Lew turned now to Mister Chatterbox.

“Well, buster. Looks like we’re going to get what we came here to see. If this thing should rob me of the capacity for speech somehow, I’ll communicate to you via a rudimentary tap code as a contingency plan. It’ll feature abbreviations of my invention, concise to transfer quickly but informative enough to grasp. I’ll start with “C-L,” that way you’ll know it’s me and not an interceptor. Still, try to pay attention. I don’t want to have to start repeating myself now.”

Colonel Lew walked out under the balloon, gun in hand. Twig turned to the sky to avert her gaze. Mister Chatterbox, through hand-shielded eyes and a pit in his stomach, began to count down.

Then it began to rain. First, Mister Chatterbox felt a drop on his arm, just one. Soon, Twig felt two on her head. Suddenly, the drops were multiplying by integers of around umpteen thousand, and it began to pour. The only one apparently not getting soaked was Colonel Lew, who stood underneath Wilkie Whelp, with his gun raised to the air.

But something else fell down besides rain, something that had been traveling all day too, and had, in fact, made a similar trip from the parade in town to that very field. A bullet raced down from the sky, through the dark clouds, through the droplets, and, finally, through the front paw of one giant runaway dog balloon.

First, there was a gush that ran out of the pierced paw, and Wilkie Whelp lilted, careened downward, began to shrink up, and finally fell to the earth on top of one grizzled old man.

The two standing on the sidelines raced toward the black shroud. Twig cut through a section of Wilkie Whelp’s tail to reach Colonel Lew. Mister Chatterbox, feeling for the tapping finger, reached beneath to fish him out.

The grizzled man shook himself off and stood upright after a moment.

“Well,” he said, “I guess I’ll go home.”

Twig attempted to hand Colonel Lew the patch she had cut, along with the knife. He accepted the latter readily, but not the former.

“Thanks, sport. But I figure it this way, my old hut has enough balloon patches a man will ever need in one lifetime. You’ve got the right idea, though. Someone should hang onto a piece of him…”

Colonel Lew removed the section of the weather balloon from his pocket and handed it to her as well. Twig glanced down at the balloon patches knowingly.

“I was — waddyacallit — hinting at it being you,” said Colonel Lew.

“Yes,” Twig, “I realized. I suppose,” she began, “I could use this patch to fix up that lousy parachute I’ve got stowed away somewhere. And this old weather balloon could come in handy there too, and Disquietude, I’m sure I can find a place for…”

Colonel Lew turned to Mister Chatterbox.

“Buster, feel free to drop by for the next one. You’ll know where to find me. Maybe — waddyacallit — knock this time.”

Colonel Lew began to walk off, and Twig arranged her balloons before she put on her goggles and glanced up in the watery sky.

“Boy, it’ll be rained out in Pestville tonight.”

The parade had been called off until further notice due to adverse weather conditions. A convoy of vehicles had already hit the road when the clouds grew dark. They were stalled now nearby the field, with some of the more curious travelers venturing over once they had heard reports of a giant dog falling from the sky.

“Perfect,” said Thweebly, “just perfect.”

“Now, now, dear,” said his mother, “I know how disappointed you are when a rally gets the axe. Just remember, dear. There will be other whistle stops down the line.”

“Say, what’s that over there?” Thweebly said as he looked out the car window, “All those people crowding around in the middle of some field. You’d think that old windbag Snodgrass was out there turning and waving them to death.”

“But, dear,” his mother said, “haven’t you heard?”

“Heard what, Mother? Did Snodgrass turn and wave himself to death?”

“The balloon, dear. At the parade. One of them sailed right over our heads.”

“Whose was this?”

I don’t think it belonged to any of the mayoral nominees, dear. Wilkie Whelp, he’s called. I suspect that’s him they’ve nabbed him out there. A dog, I’m told.”

“The parade,” groused Thweebly, “don’t remind me, Mother.”

“Say, you might just be able to have your whistle stop after all. All those registered voters crowding around Wilkie Whelp…”

“Wait a minute, Mother,” said Thweebly with a sudden jolt of inspiration, “with all of these people around, I’ll bet I can reach a ballot box’s worth of registered voters! I might be able to have that whistle stop after all. Don’t forget the megaphone, Mother. Sometimes, you forget it.”

“That’s only because you make your Mother so proud, dear. You don’t know the pride it gives me to say ‘that’s my son, the candidate.’”

The Thweeblies stepped out of the car and into the rain. The hopeful prospective mayor fought his way through the crowd to get a glimpse of Wilkie Whelp. Once he had seen enough, he lowered his hat and tapped the megaphone.

“Folks,” he said, “that’s a pity, I mean, that’s a cryin’ shame. Durn near ‘nuff to make you wanna shed a tear. Now, I know we’re all loath to see it, but I suppose them’s the facts of life and the way of flesh and so on and so forth. That’s the cycle for you, there’s no fighting it. We got to stay strong, for the li’l ones. Hello, boy,”

Thweebly stuck the megaphone in the face of a small, solemn-looking child near the balloon.

“Don’t be upset now. It’ll be tough, but fight it. He’s better off this way.”

“Not unless the dust is better than air,” said the boy.

“Uh, yeah. Okay. But, for me, personally folks, my attachment goes back even further. Why, I’ve been the biggest fan of Wesley Whelk for as long as I can remember…”

Another car sat parked along the road.

“I’ve taken ‘er as far as she’ll go, Cap’n,” said the chauffeur to Snodgrass, who sat beside Miss Kudzu Vine in the back. “Sorry, ‘sir.’ Haven’t gotten myself used to that. A man spends all that time at sea, under an alien sun, comes back to civilian life, it changes him. I still hear the sea lappin’ up in my dreams. Other day, I thought I spotted me a message in a bottle clogging my sink. Never thought I’d want to look at water again, but then, there was this boat-burner. Even saw a li’l pile of sailor skeletons down the pipe when I pulled the drain. Or is it skeleton sailors? Do y’know, Cap’n? Sorry, sir. I tried calling the rest of your crew to tell ‘em we’ll get there late, but they said the line was down. ‘Down’ was their word, not mine. I’d like to show ‘em what a real line is. Landlubbers and their wheels within wheels. Still, sometimes it helps to have in a pinch. Like these headlights, St. Elmo’s fire right in your vessel. And a foghorn to boot. Say, now

that we're on the subject, did I ever tell you about the time the whole ship had to survive off old boots and brine water for a week? Got so bad, we even started drawing straws to see who'd go under the knife first. I told 'em I couldn't do it. My heart's too tender. Pretty good, eh, Cap'n, eh?"

The words hardly reached Snodgrass. On a drawing pad, Miss Kudzu Vine was doodling the scene out of the rain-soaked window; the crowd that surrounded the fallen dog, that fool Thweebly spouting off again, and, behind him, tucking herself into a remote corner of the action was his illustrious mother. How he pined to lift her to the lucky title of Mrs. Snodgrass. Sometimes, he would say the name accidentally when he meant to talk to Miss Kudzu Vine, then would say it again just to picture it. He sighed as he thought of the long days he had had and the ones that lay ahead spent with his head in buried in-between his hands, pining away. The sigh formed mist on the window, and he drew a circle around where the object of his affection stood and how she would remain in his mind; a distant dove amongst the fog.

A dirigible emerged from below the clouds and touched down near Wilkie Whelp. Out of it climbed Biddlebaum and Kilgore, who trudged over to the crowd and the elegiac spot itself.

"Here lyeth the bodye of Wilkie Whelp," said the artist.

The parade manager eyed the balloon.

"Looks like those reports about the gunshots were right. Seems our unknown Lone Ranger is to stay unknown. Guess that parade paraphernalia coupon'll burning a hole my pocket now. Well, I suppose these are the breaks. Now you've got him back."

"Juvenalia," Biddlebaum said, "I was but a kid when I made him. I was bold, I was brash. I still hadn't escaped the influence of the mascot of Franklin's Mutt Feed Emporium. Still, these things are important to keep one's trophy room. Wilkie Whelp deserves as much of a legacy as his creator does."

"Well," said Kilgore, "we'll see what this crowd can do. Stuff like this, it's the saddest thing in a parade manager's day."

"What about you? Plan on throwing him in any more parades? Getting an artist of knots to tie the tethers?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm getting out of the business altogether. It's a young man's game. But I'll you one thing, I've been bitten by the airship bug. I'm dynamite with a dirigible. That seems to be where the luck is running. If not, who knows. I guess I'll see where the breaks land me."

“That’s that then, Kilgore. You on your path, I on mine. I wonder when inspiration will strike next. I thought about a balloon shaped like you with a head of horns and a pointed tail, but now I don’t know who would get it.”

“You know, Biddlebaum, you don’t get to be my age without hearing a few stories. Every parade manager I know has a favorite. There’s always been one I’ve taken an interest in. About this knife thrower for the circus who had an unfortunate run-in with his own floating ducks or loons or something.”

“Something in that. A tragical irony. Tell me more…”

The crowd backed away from the balloon as a few parade organizers made themselves known, and with the assistance of the two dirigible passengers, began to roll him up. Someone hauling a shipment of alfalfa offered an empty crate to place him in. A tear gas bomb in the pocket of a deputy chief burst in the commotion and a pungent fog rolled through the audience, stinging each eye and duct. As a small group lugged Wilkie Whelp into the back of a car, the band played a plaintive dirge.

Soon, the field was as empty as it must’ve been at the very beginning of the day, all save for the presence of Mister Chatterbox, standing alone in the rain, trying to make up his mind. He looked at the path that led back to see a figure over the horizon. Running towards him, clad in red, the distance was soon closed. He saw that it was a singing telegram girl sent from the Happy Sappy Telegram & Greeting Card Company, with a red potter’s cap to match the outfit, which was lined with golden buttons and a pin that featured a bright smiling Sun on it. She stopped a few steps from Mister Chatterbox, and was winded from the run.

“Deliver, they said — asked for directions in town, short walk, they said — suitable for dog days — at train station, they said — asked at the station — down the road, they said — asked at the road —in a field, they said — asked in a field, then another, then another — through forests, over hills — short walk, they said…”

She handed him a multicolored balloon bouquet and the card that went with it.

“Here,” she said, “you take ‘em.”

He paid her with the crumpled dollar bill. And with that, she walked off.

Mister Chatterbox thought about the passages and the pictures he would include in his column. He wondered how to condense the personalities of those he’d met into a comparatively

small allotted space. The balloons were being knocked about by the rain. He carefully opened and read the message written on the embroidered card: “Get well soon.”

Looking up, he saw the stars peeking through the shadows of the clouds. He began to walk his way back, wondering if he could still make the train.

THE END?

From the dirigible:

“Rig up this dirigible right away.”

“Hello, Kilgore…”

“Hello, Moolman…”

“Well, there’s no use prancing around it all ditzy-like. You’d better make gangway for me in that dirigible.” He inspected his fingernails idly.

“I don’t have to make you anything.”

“Oh, really?” laughed Moolman. “Because I have a letter here from the High Ideals Comittee that says you have to accept a competing manager if you ever want to see another parade in your mitts. Real impassioned letter, too. Four-syllable words.”

Kilgore reluctantly stood aside.

…

“What are we waiting for?” said Moolman.

Kilgore sat with his head resting on his hands. “We have to wait for the pilot to do some repair or something. I believe the phrase ‘emergency’ was used.”

The pilot said he was done and they could now resume flight.

Just then, another man appeared.

“You’d better hang on a second guys,” he said, “I think, before any harsh words are exclaimed, you’d better just let me aboard.”

“Funny, Jerry,” said Moolman. “But play time’s over. Goodbye.”

He shut the dirigible door, but Jerry’s foot blocked it. When they opened the door fully again, Jerry was standing there with a letter in his hand.

“I happen to have here, a letter from the Higher Ideals Comittee that says you’ve got to let me in.”

“You’re not getting in here.”

Kilgore buried his head in his hands.

“Jesus,” he said, “just remember to close the door before you sit down.”

…

The three of them looked down at the road that they passed over.

“What are we up here for again?” asked Jerry.

“I don’t know what you’re doing,” said Moolman, “but I’ve got plans of my own. Kilgore’s meeting some person, some Brittlebalm or other.”

“Biddlebaum,” corrected Kilgore wearily, “he’s driving a car on that road. He’ll drive by and signal us when we can land.”

“He says he’ll be here in a few minutes.”

“Fine.”

“Five?”

“Fine.”

“Nine?”

“Fine”

Just then, a car swerved onto the road, and began waving a green flag.

“Look out,” said Jerry with a snicker, “here comes your boyfriend.”

Yet another fragment:

“I reckon after you’ve tried me out, with no success, might I add,” continued the grizzled man on the porch, “you’ll saunter on over to Monty Heep’s grotto and see if that old geezer will limp his way to balloon. Maybe shuffle, if he’s having a good day.”

…

“You’re a real crack shot,” said Twig, “you’re about the duckiest huntsman I ever saw.”

“Colonel Lew,” he threw back his thumb again, “always gets his man — more or less — even if a little rain must fall. If you wanted incompetence, you could’ve gone to Monty Heep for that.”

…

The balloon burst and fell out of Colonel Lew’s sight. A mysterious *fwooshing* sound had escaped from the nearby woods, while the trio scanned around, a gangly man, clad in formal attire and with a salt-and-pepper handlebar mustache, emerged from the underbrush. He spoke haughtily, clutching a wooden bow.

“Don’t tell me, just stop me right here, plant me right where I stand,” the archer stuck his head forward, as if to confirm his worst suspicions, “that couldn’t be who I think it is, could it?”

Colonel Lew responded with a curdled face.

“Monty Heep,” he said, “so we meet again.”

“That’s right, old hoss. I suppose you were hoping for one of those quick and clean balloon hunts, huh? Not if old Monty Heep has anything to say about it.”

“Last I heard,” said Colonel Lew, “you were hunting for a different sort of balloon as of late. To feed yourself some oxygen, you old geezer.”

“No such thing, old hoss, no such thing. I’m after that reward myself, that golden one-comma-zero-zero-zero. The parade goods and parade paraphernalia coupon doesn’t sound half-bad, either.”

He inspected the three of them.

“Traveling with company, are we? You know what these here arrows are for?”

He gestured to the quiver over his shoulder.

“For missing,” said Twig.

“No,” replied Monty Heep, “you see, it’s always repeater this, hand-cannon that. I travel light. It’s my calling card. Anyone sees a downed balloon and an arrow adjacent, they know old Monty Heep has had a hand in Fortuna’s outcome.”

“You still like to play marksman with that bow, don’t you,” said Colonel Lew.

“Well, I suspect I’ll just mosey on over to that there Wilkie Whelp and see what he has to say about my ‘playing.’. Let us see where Fortuna stopped her wheel this time, old hoss.”

“Yes,” said Colonel Lew, “let’s.”

…

“Well, there goes that,” mourned Monty Heep in the sopping field, “better kiss that reward and that parade goods and parade paraphernalia coupon goodbye.”

Monty Heep removed the slip of paper from his pocket and, as he pushed his face closer, caught sight of a hitherto unfamiliar decimal.

“One-dot-zero-zero-zero,” he observed wistfully.

Monty Heep said it was the biggest disappointment of his professional career, and slinked away.

The carousel never stops:

Sport, chief, champ(ion), tiger, governor?